



LINELT 2013

A Pragmatic Analysis of *Yes/No* Questions in English with Reference to Press Conferences

Rauf Kareem Mahmood^{a*}^aPhD in English Language and Linguistics, Lecturer, Department of English, University of Sulaimani, Sulaimani, *964, Iran

Abstract

Questions tend to be the most productive tool for obtaining information, knowledge, test taking, health-care, justice, criminal investigations, fun, etc. Whenever two people meet, the simplest form of contact might be 'Hi!' which is an inbuilt question directed by the addresser to the addressee to tell the latter that s/he means something to him/her. The two basic types of questions in English are information questions 'also called *wh*-questions' and *yes/no* questions 'also called polarity questions'. This paper deals with the second type, viz. *yes/no* questions in English from a pragmatic standpoint. The ultimate goal is to find out if the syntactically oriented term '*yes/no* questions' is also pragmatically valuable, or needs to be approached differently. Concerning the term '*yes/no* question', no such questions start with either *yes* or *no*. They normally start with an operator 'main or auxiliary verb', but are supposed to be answered with either *yes* or *no*. Hence, starting from the semantic perspective, one might claim that such questions are not specifically *yes/no* questions, but rather 'questions that are responded to with *yes* or *no*'. This implies a lack of precision in the term. This study covers *yes/no* questions addressed to Barak Obama, President of United States of America, in six randomly selected press conferences, and how he decides to answer in any other way or using any term, but rarely saying *yes* or *no*. The study ends with a suggestion of an alternative term to '*yes/no* questions' in English from a pragmatic perspective.

© 2014 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>).

Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of LINELT 2013.

Keywords: *yes/no* questions, speech acts, press conference, pragmatic analysis; verification;

* Corresponding author: Rauf Kareem Mahmood.
E-mail address: rkpenjweni@yahoo.com

Introduction

Interrogative sentences are considered to be of two major types: *yes/no* interrogatives and *wh*-interrogatives (Quirk et al., 1985). This paper addresses the potentiality and eligibility of *yes/no* questions in terms of labelling from a pragmatic standpoint, i.e. it is an attempt to find out if the term *yes/no* questions is appropriate or needs to be renamed. With reference to the language of politics and diplomacy, this research hypothesizes that the term *yes/no* question is an impractical term for such a kind of sentence that seeks a *yes* or *no* answer, but rarely obtains this. This paper also hypothesizes that the term 'verification questions' might be a suitable alternative term to *yes/no* questions from a pragmatic perspective. The paper highlights the definition of *yes/no* questions in English, and then analyses this type of question pragmatically, with a main focus on speech act theory applied to political and diplomatic speech at press conferences. The paper ends with a conclusion and list of references.

1. *Yes-no questions: definitions*

Inspired by the name, defining *yes/no* questions does not seem to be a difficult process. Semantically, a *yes/no* question is supposed to be a question that seeks *yes* or *no* in response. This might also be the basic reason for calling it a 'polarity question', with the two poles being *yes* and *no*. Consider:

- (1) Question: Does Muhammad live in London?

Answer: Yes, he does.

- (2) Question: Are you going to watch the match tonight?

Answer: Unfortunately no, because I will be studying for the exam.

In both questions, the addresser seeks a confirmation of the proposition he/she makes with *yes* or *no*, and they achieve that goal. Moreover, *yes/no* questions can be either positive "...with no bias in expectation towards a positive or negative response" or negative "Negative orientation is found in questions which contain a negative form of one kind or another" (ibid: 808). Consider

- (3) Question: Do you go shopping every weekend?

Possible answers: Yes, I do. OR No, I don't.

- (4) Question: Haven't you told her the truth?

Answer: - Yes, I have. > - No, I haven't. (Expecting a positive response highly dominates a negative one, since the question can simply be paraphrased as 'Surely you have told her the truth, haven't you?')

Therefore, from the semantic truth condition perspective *yes/no* questions are so named due to the expectation of a 'yes' or a 'no' response, considering the fact that a 'yes' or a 'no' response may sometimes become the dominant expected response. Additionally, Progovac (1994) postulates that a 'yes' answer may sometimes dominate a 'no' one, even with a positive polar question, such as in (5)

- (5) Question: Did Mary lift a finger/bun?

Answer: Yes, she did. (a 'no' answer would certainly look odd.) (ibid.)

On the other hand, Ginsburg and Sag (2000) point out that due to the absence of an answer such as the French "si" in modern English, responding to a negative polar question might result in ambiguity which can be resolved with a follow up question, as in (6)

- (6) Question: Aren't you tired?

Answer: Yes.

Question: Are you tired or not?

2. *Pragmatic analysis of yes/no questions:*

Contextualization is a main domain of pragmatics. It is the context that dedicates space for interlocutors to pick a given response to any question among a set of possible responses. In the case of *yes/no* questions, it might be pragmatically possible to respond with *yes* or *no* without causing ambiguity, as in examples 1, 2 and 3. But consider (7)

- (7) Question: Do you support appointing Jack for the post?

Answer: Oh, Jack is so lazy.

It is supposed to be a *yes/no* question, but the answer is neither *yes* nor *no*. Nonetheless, the questioner can easily infer a '*no*' answer from the hearer, due to the match between the conversational implicature and the inference.

3. *Yes/no questions and Speech Acts:*

Austin (1962 PAGE?) makes a three-fold classification of levels of any speech act, namely 'Locution 'the actual words uttered', illocution 'the force or intention behind the words'; perlocution 'the effect of the illocution on the hearer''. This can be applied to both direct/explicit and indirect/implicit speech acts. Consider (8) and (9)

(8) Question: Did you receive the conference invitation letter? (Direct Speech Act)

Answer: Yes, I did.

(9) Question: I don't know if you received the conference invitation letter. (Indirect Speech Act)

Answer: Yes, I did.

In (8), the speaker directs a question to the hearer, and the latter responds accordingly, but in (9) the speaker implies a question or an inquiry through his statement, and the hearer infers the question from the statement. Hence, as in (8), s/he responds accordingly. Both (8) and (9) can be analysed according to Austin's levels of speech acts as follows:

In (8) the locutionary act is the question (Did you receive the conference invitation letter?), the illocutionary act or force tends to be an inquiry about a given piece of information implied in the content of the question, and the perlocutionary act, i.e. the impact of the locutionary act on the hearer, is represented by the hearer's direct answer (Yes, I did). In (9), however, the locutionary act is a statement, but the speaker's implication behind the statement does not tend to be a confirmation of the content of his/her statement, but rather one that seeks a follow-up response from the hearer. That is, the statement has the force or illocutionary act of a question. The hearer infers that and responds with (Yes, I did.), hence accomplishing the required perlocutionary impact.

As specified in the introduction, to support the main hypothesis of the paper, reference is made to questions and answers made during several press conferences involving the US President, Barak Obama. Six press conferences have been randomly selected and analysed (Table 1). In 156 questions directed to the US President, 74 questions were in the form of *yes/no* questions, i.e. seeking *yes* or *no*. But, of this number, only 8 *yes/no* questions were answered with *yes* or *no* (4 with *yes* and 4 with *no*), whereas the other 66 questions were all answered differently without using *yes* or *no*. Some of the answers might have implicitly suggested *yes* or *no*, but that would not tolerate the obvious absence of the manifestation of *yes/no* questions, hence the term is not self-explanatory. Analysing speech acts as being 'direct or indirect' depends heavily on the conversational implicatures established by the speaker, and the inferences formed by the hearer. Communication can be successful if the interlocutors cooperate. The influential mechanism for cooperation is a one-to-one match between the speaker's conversational implicatures and the hearer's formed inferences. It is not common to hear a '*yes*' or a '*no*' answer for every *yes/no* question, something that might want us to remove the name '*yes/no* question' from such a type of sentence. This case is more dominantly observed if *yes/no* questions are pragmatically analysed.

Table 1. Answering Yes/No questions in selected press conferences held for the United States President, Barak Obama

#	Conference Date	Subjects	No. of questions asked	No. of Yes/No questions	Answering the Yes/No question with		
					Yes	No	None of them
1	March 24, 2009	Moving US Economy from recession to recovery	32	12	2	1	9
2	July 22, 2009	Health insurance reform	23	10	0	1	9
3	May 27, 2010	Gulf oil spill, immigration and	26	8	0	0	8

Afghanistan

4	February 9, 2009	US State of Economy	17	11	0	1	10
5	June 23, 2009	Iran, US energy economy and health care	37	23	2	0	21
6	August 9, 2013	US Patriot Act and Surveillance system	21	10	0	1	9
Totals			156	74	4	4	66
Percentages				47.435%*	5.405%	5.405%	89.189%

Yes/no questions might frequently be replied to indirectly, in which the hearer's inference-formation capacity plays the leading role in obtaining a clear output from the response. At some other times, neither a '*yes*' nor a '*no*' response is detected from such questions, and it is left for the hearer to get something out of the response. This case tends to be actively dominant in this particular politician's responses to journalists at press conferences. Consider the following examples (one from each of two different press conferences):

(10) Question: Is there a need for a global currency?

President Obama: I don't believe that there's a need for a global currency. (Press Conference 1)

The implicature made by the US President in (1) with the utterance 'I don't believe...' creates the inference that in the President's opinion, a global currency is not needed, but which does not reject the possibility of offering a different opinion. Hence, a '*no*' answer is not absolutely guaranteed. In (11), however, the US President tries to give a reply that looks stronger than a '*yes*' by providing evidence for the advancement that has taken place in the White House with regard to the issue of transparency.

(11) Question: Are you fulfilling your promise of transparency in the White House?

President Obama: Well, on the list of health-care executives who visited us, most of the time, you guys have been in there taking pictures. So it hasn't been a secret. And my understanding is, we just sent a letter out providing a full list of all the executives. But frankly, these have mostly been at least photo sprays, where you could see who was participating. (Press Conference 2)

In (12), the question is seemingly intended to embarrass President Obama. It would clearly be an incompetent reply if he responds with either *yes* or *no*, but he diligently prefers to leave the comparison for the correspondents themselves. Something similar happens with his reply to the question in (13) where he deliberately expands the floor of underestimation to the American people rather than doing it himself.

(12) Question: Can you respond to all the comparisons that people are making about this with yourself?

President Obama: I'll leave it to you guys to make those comparisons and make -- and make -- and make judgments on it, because -- because what I'm spending my time thinking about is, how do we solve the problem? (Press Conference 3)

(13) Question: Did you underestimate how hard it would be to change the way Washington works?

President Obama: Oh, I don't think -- I don't think I underestimated it. I don't think the -- the American people underestimated it. They understand that there have been a lot of bad habits built up here in Washington and it's going to take time to break down some of those bad habits. (Press Conference 4)

To avoid saying *yes* or *no* in reply to a question, indirect responses are used to justify an existing situation, as in (14) where the US President mentions several reasons for not welcoming Iranian diplomats if they keep on behaving in a way that does not meet with America's interests. Nonetheless, the same reasons might be approached as conditions for Iranian diplomats to fulfil if they want to be welcomed by the United States.

(14) Question: Are Iranian diplomats still welcome at the embassy on the Fourth of July, sir?

President Obama: Well, I think as you're aware, Major, we don't have formal diplomatic relations with -- we don't have formal diplomatic relations with Iran. I think that we have said that if Iran chooses a path that abides by international norms and principles, then we are interested in healing some of the wounds of 30 years, in terms of U.S.-Iranian relations. But that is a choice that the Iranians are going to have to make. (Press Conference 5)

In (15), the US President refutes to confirm that he supports any shut down, but prefers to leave the issue for people to support or refute, reminding them of the several issues listed in his response:

(15) Question: Would you choose to let the government shut down to ensure that Obamacare remains funded?

President Obama: Well, I'm not going to engage in hypotheticals. I can tell you that the American people would have difficulty understanding why we would weaken our economy, shut down our government, shut down vital services, have people who are not getting paid who then can't go to restaurants or shop for clothes, or all the other things that we're doing here because Republicans have determined that they don't want to see these folks get health care. (Press Conference 6)

Conclusion

In order to be descriptive, linguistics cannot impose on interlocutors - politicians and diplomats for example – the need to provide a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’ answer to such questions to match with the name of that type of question. However, linguists have the right to rename linguistic forms when they find out that the term does not correspond to the content. Therefore, the mismatch between the illocutionary act of questioning, which is mainly obtaining a *yes* or *no* response, and the actual perlocutionary act over the hearer, leads to the production of other forms in response to the questions, hence resulting in serious reconsideration over finding an alternative term to *yes/no* questions from a pragmatic perspective. Based on the collected data for this paper, it has been concluded that pragmatically the term is invalid in the case of a vast majority of *yes/no* questions. However, the term ‘verification questions’ might be a pragmatically valid and offer a valuable alternative term to *yes/no* questions.

References

- Austin, J. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ginzburg, I. & Sag, I. (2000). *Interrogative sentences: the Form, meaning, and use of English interrogatives*. Stanford, California: CSLI Publications.
- Progovac, L. (1994). *Negative and positive polarity (a binding approach)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G. & Svartvik, J. (1985) *A comprehensive grammar of the English language*. New York: Longman.
- http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/24/us/politics/24text-obama.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 (Press conference 1)
- http://blogs.suntimes.com/sweet/2009/07/obama_july_22_2009_press_confe.html (Press conference 2)
- http://blogs.suntimes.com/sweet/2010/05/obama_on_bp_oil_spill_im_fully.html (Press conference 3)
- <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/09/us/politics/09text-obama.html?pagewanted=all> (Press conference 4)
- <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/press-conference-president-6-23-09> (Press conference 5)
- <http://www.npr.org/2013/08/09/210574114/transcript-president-obamas-news-conference>